security clearance, gave current technological information on the planet.

"I appreciate your willingness to assist us and I would like to invite you to surroundings more comfortable than our formal residence in Tlaplat. Please join me at my own vacation home. These are the coordinates." He read the string of numbers from a memorandum handed him by an aide. They were humanoid, but not human. The Ixmahx wore boney ridges where their eyebrows should have been and carried their large heads high on an extra vertebrae. The Speaker wore a simple garment draped around his shoulders, but the aide, dressed in a uniform jacket, sported fluttering ribbons and jeweled epalets. It gave him an overdressed and slightly foppish appearance, like a child in adult's clothing. Nadia thought the Speaker looked tired, but she knew better than to place any confidence in her ability to interpret alien expression.

"You honor us, Speaker. I am First Officer Spock. We shall arrive in approximately--" he paused to convert standard time into planetary units, "7 Xtlal."

T'serek set the coordinates and waited for Spock's nod to activate the course change. The security men went through the motions of checking out already inspected weapons. Sunderson turned to Nadia and said that she wished they'd worn dress uniforms.

"I never visited a VIP before."

"You look fine in fatigues," Nadia answered, "and you'll be a lot more comfortable." Nadia had chosen the streamlined white uniform they habitually wore in the lab for more than comfort. The fatigues were thermally adjustable, offered a high degree of protection against acid, abrasives or shock, not to mention just plain dirt. The cushioned boot was much better for hiking than the dress black. Sunderson's fair skin and pale hair showed to advantage over the fabric, but if she wanted to drown herself in ethnic offerings, she'd probably be given the chance later. First there was work to do and Nadia didn't want them to have their minds on their hemlines.

They came down in the twilight zone, in a wilderness of rock fissured with deep canyons. The Speaker's vacation home was modest in size, but not in value. It was constructed of an organic crystal, a single convoluted gem glowing softly in the dusk. T'serek set them down on a lavendar sward where three beribboned Ixmahx waited. As the airlock cycled, moist night air cooled the temperature constant atmosphere of the shuttle. It smelled natural, the breath of a planet.

As security chief, T'serek was first out the lock, and he waved his men to flank it on either side while Spock and the others exited. His parade rest stance could have been interpreted as an honor guard except for that electric vitality that made him noticeable even when he was motionless.

They followed the Ixmahx over a gray and lavendar garden where red volcanic rock burst through the symmetry randomly, reminding them of the surrounding wasteland. It could have been natural or an imitation of nature intended as art. The crystal home had no door, only a small tunnel, like the mouth to a cave, and the pale turf from the garden carpeted the floor inside without interruption. The interior walls were frosted, glowing with light, and their smooth texture reminded Nadia of sand castles she had built as a child, or candles whose wax was designed to weep. It was almost impossible not to reach out and touch the surface. Their escort, his shoulder ribbons fluttering, led them around a moulded flow of crystal and into a larger chamber where the Planetary Speaker stood waiting for them--between two Romulan guards.

T'serek reacted while Nadia was still realizing they had been trapped. He threw himself to the side in a flickering shoulder roll and came up with his arm around a Romulan throat, his phaser pressed to the man's ribs. The other security guards and Spock had also drawn, forming a rough triangle around the scientists, but no one fired. The Romulan weapons were aimed at Goren, not the Enterprise personnel.

A seated Romulan broke the silence, if not the tension in the room, by reaching for a glass of wine. He tasted it, leaning back against a chair that grew out of the floor with its table, extrusions of the same crystal as the walls, taking his time, considering his catch.

Finally he settled on Spock. "Tell your pretty boy to release my guard."

Spock appeared unmoved by the insult; but T'serek's face flushed and he spoke in protest. "Sir, we don't know that the Speaker is here under duress. He may be helping them."

Spock raised an eyebrow at the Romulan. At his nod one of the guards stripped the soft garment from the man's torso. A series of burns disfigured his chest. The Speaker did not react to the guard but looked past him at Spock. Under the brow ridges his eyes were deeply set, dark and piercingly intelligent.

"I'm perfectly willing to demonstrate the Speaker's integrity for you," said the Romulan.

"That will not be necessary," Spock said. "The landing party will disarm." He let his weapon drop.

T'serek gave the Romulan guard a shove away from him and threw his weapon to the side. When the freed guard turned and backhanded him--a blow that would have broken most human necks--he took it stolidly and answered, unarmed as he was, with an openhanded blow of his own that rocked the Romulan back on his heels.

The Romulan commander barked an order that made the guard fall back. To Spock, he said, "If he strikes me, I will kill one member of your party for each blow." With deliberate, stalking grace, he approached T'serek and deliberately drew back a hand to strike. Immobilized by the threat, the Guthrie kept his hands at his sides, but the fire in his eye did not change to fear. The Romulan smiled and turned the slap into a caress, stroking Dray's bright hair, his round human ear and the side of his throat.

"A beautiful pet and not so fragile as humans usually are. What possibilities.... I would not have suspected you of such good taste, Spock. It might explain your affront to one of my house--" He kept on stroking, his body close to Dray's, edging behind him, standing even closer, while Dray's hands doubled into fists and the shamed color burned deeper in his face. "--explain, not excuse--" He locked eyes with Spock as his hand moved to T'serek's groin. "One blow, one life. When does the Enterprise return?"

There was no question of answering. With no knowledge of the Romulan's plans or needs, any answer, true or false, might seal their own death warrants. T'serek did not move or protest under